FINDING AND RECOMMENDATION(S)

Submitted by: Conservation Community

Finding: (*i.e., Conclusions reached after investigation and/or evaluation of facts*)

There is a need to appropriately thin our Stream Environment Zones (SEZs) to reduce fire threat while protecting SEZs from environmental harm.

Background and Supporting Evidence: *(A short statement justifying the Finding and describing desired outcome(s); usually no more than half a page.)*

1. It has become common knowledge since the Angora Fire that SEZs have not been thinned in line with the rest of our forested areas. The use of equipment, access roads, etc., has been limited in order to protect these sensitive environments from harm (disturbance in SEZs creates significant sediment and nutrient loading to the Lake, which contributes to the loss of Tahoe's famed clarity). While low-impact mechanical equipment has not been prohibited by the Lahontan RWQCB since 1994 (and TRPA since 2004), agencies have been reluctant to try low-impact methods. Hand-thinning has always been an option, as demonstrated by the California and Nevada State Parks and the CTC, and is proven to be effective as seen in hand-thinned units burned in the Angora Fire.

2. Government agencies have noted that the additional environmental review/administrative burden that must be done for these areas has discouraged them from doing work in SEZs because it would require more resources/staff time upfront, thus many SEZs have not been thinned. While not all SEZs may pose the highest threat, the topography of the Basin tends to create a situation where a wind-driven fire will advance through or across an SEZ, *thinned or not.* In the Tahoe basin, with its special sources of funding not available to other forests (available because of the public's desire to restore and protect Tahoe more than other areas), it is important to factor in the high priority of protecting water quality and lake clarity. Thus, we must prioritize areas based on their threat levels/risk, not based on the process involved. Without prioritization, the easiest areas will always get thinned first rather than those at greatest risk from wildfire. For example, where SEZs pose a high risk in the event a fire is started in a given fireshed, plans should focus on

the SEZ first. Where an SEZ does not pose the highest threat, plans should focus on the other areas that do.

3. It is well recognized that uncharacteristic fire threat comes from the "smaller stuff" – the small trees (up to ~16" dbh), surface and ladder fuels, etc. There are many options for thinning these materials from SEZs that will not cause harm nor conflict with state laws that require SEZs be protected from harm.

4. Further, new technology continues to be developed, creating opportunities to test new methods, including smaller tracked vehicles, conveyor belts, cable systems and over-the snow operations.

Recommendation(s) *(Based upon an analysis of the Finding, the following recommendation(s) should be made to the Governors):*

1. **Utilize the data from other SEZ projects (e.g. Heavenly Valley Creek Demonstration Project, Celio Ranch, etc.) to help guide future treatments in SEZs. Where no data exist for a specific condition (e.g. soil type, vegetation type, moisture conditions, etc.), perform another demonstration project. (Information from all SEZ studies should be stored in one location that everyone can access). Eventually, information would be available for every condition. In that way the appropriate scientific data are gathered. Thus localized data would guide SEZ project planning and implementation throughout all Basin SEZs.**

2. **Thin SEZs based on their demonstrated high fire threat in a given "fireshed" according to water quality and SEZ science, not based on the administrative process.**

3. **Use the many sensitive options available to appropriately thin SEZs without causing harm to the Basin's environment and Lake Tahoe's famed clarity. Options include hand-thinning, low impact equipment, new technology (e.g. conveyor belt systems, cable systems, etc.), over-the-snow operations, etc.**

4. **Test new technology and methods for thinning SEZs through demonstration projects.**

Impacts of Implementation: *(The implementation of any Recommendation is likely to have specific impacts. Consider potential consequences related to each of the following areas)***:**

Analysis of impacts on the following factors is REQUIRED (Best Estimate):

- ☐ Cost - Where new methods are employed and/or demonstration projects are implemented, upfront costs may be higher in order to obtain the necessary data but costs will be reduced over time as agencies adopt the new methods.
- ☐ Funding source
- ☐ Staffing
- ☐ Existing regulations and/or laws All recommendations can be performed under existing laws.

Analysis of impacts on the following factors is OPTIONAL:

- ☐ Operational
- ☐ Social
- ☐ Political
- ☐ Policy
- ☐ Health and Safety - Recommendations will encourage the highest threat areas to be treated first and for SEZs to be thinned appropriately since either no thinning or “over-thinning” both contribute to increased fire danger.
- ☐ Environmental - These activities will meet fire protection and forest restoration needs while also protecting Tahoe’s famed clarity. In fact, for purposes of streamlining processes, we suggest forest managers view SEZ projects as a combined “SEZ restoration project” and work with other agencies to address other ecological needs of SEZs. This will be a more efficient use of the public’s money.
- ☐ Interagency